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Tragedies and Successes of the Commons

The Israeli Kibbutz as a Case Study of Community Resilience Against Capitalism

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The concept of the tragedy of the commons – as famously coined in 1968 by American scientist Garrett Hardin – underlies many environmental problems today. The premise is simple: When people share a resource, they are more likely to abuse it. Because each individual shares the costs of the resource but does not need to share the benefits gained from using the resource, it is a rational economic decision to abuse the resource. Each individual action may do little noticeable harm, but en masse the damage contributes to significantly diminishing or destroying the shared resource. Hardin based his work on a theory opined in 1833 by British economist William Forster Lloyd, who provided the example of a community's shared pastureland, or commons. Such commons for grazing were common in Europe for centuries until the industrial and technological revolutions largely ended animal rearing by most private citizens. And in the oldest public park in the United States – Boston Common – formerly served as a common area for livestock, and it too suffered from the classic agricultural tragedy of the commons in the 1600s until regulations limited the number of cows that could use the land at one time. Individuals in a community who share pastureland are economically incentivized to overgraze it, leading to its tragic loss.

Today climate change is a striking example of the tragedy of the commons. The atmosphere is our shared resource, our commons, shared by every human on the planet. Individual actors – whether they are owners of coal-fired power plants or owners of cars and airlines or airline passengers – individually benefit from the pollution of the atmospheric commons yet only pay for a share of the negative consequences of their actions, as the costs of their pollution are spread across society. Everyone makes economically rational decisions and we all pay the price. Basically, we make individual decisions for individual benefit, to the detriment of the community, and in absence of (or in opposition to) communal decision making.

The tragedy of the commons has been used as justification for privatization of communal resources. The "this is why we can't have nice things" argument posits that corporations rather than governments or communities are the best stewards of public resources – that everything from parks and schools to energy generation and

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water provision should be privatized – because when communities manage their own resources, they allegedly misuse them: a tragedy of the commons.

However, there have been examples of successes of the commons as well, situations where use of the commons and community building has led to a better outcome for all participants. The traditionally socialist-Zionist communal Israeli *kibbutz* (plural: *kibbutzim*) utilized a common-property regime as well as a community-based management system instead of government- or market-based solutions. With the first kibbutz, Degania Alef, established in 1909 in what was then Ottoman-controlled Palestine, kibbutzim became an integral part of Israel's development as a modern state. At its peak in the early 1980s, across the country there were hundreds of kibbutzim, mostly agricultural and nearly all rural, and home to more than 100,000 people.

In the classical kibbutz, everything was a commons within a common-property regime, with nearly every conceivable resource shared. The kibbutz served as both the place of living and the place of work. Except for the rare case of those, such as doctors, who worked outside the kibbutz, everyone's job was on the kibbutz, and all jobs – from plucking chickens to keeping the kibbutz's budget, from cleaning the bathrooms to serving as the elected leader of the kibbutz – were considered equal, with the equal compensation of kibbutz membership and its associated benefits. (Although types of work remained largely divided by traditional gender norms.)

Generally, aside from small-budget items, such as clothing, mementos, and personal products, there was neither personal property nor personal income. Anyone's property became communal upon joining the kibbutz, and any new income – such as inheritance, or, in the rare cases of jobs outside the kibbutz, salary – also was transferred to the kibbutz. Family homes, all roughly the same size, were owned by the kibbutz as well. Typically, individuals did not have cars; instead the kibbutz had cars that could be borrowed as needed. Meals were taken communally in the kibbutz dining room. Even children were, for better or worse, essentially communal: They did not live with their parents and their parents did not raise them alone. Instead they were raised together communally, living in separate homes for children. There also was no need to save for a child's education or for retirement: The kibbutz paid for the university education of those children who chose to attend, and all the needs of the elderly were provided by the kibbutz. No matter which way the proverbial economic winds blew, kibbutz residents were cared for by the kibbutz. No kibbutz member was left behind.

The cost of participation in a kibbutz was simply the participation itself. Kibbutz members did not need to trade their social freedoms for economic security. As socialist, rather than Communist, organizations, kibbutzim did not restrict community members' freedoms. And kibbutz members were free to leave the community whenever they wished. Further, kibbutzim were not run as totalitarian institutions but as self-governing democratic systems.

Although far from perfect, kibbutzim embodied a democratic, socialist, egalitarian, and Zionist utopia for decades. But by the late 1980s, kibbutzim headed toward a steep and steady decline. Today only a handful of traditional communal kibbutzim remain. Some have disbanded, and most have privatized, retaining their names as kibbutzim while abandoning most communal components (and often their agricultural components as well) to become more akin to condominium associations.

The kibbutz's downfall, however, did not represent the failure of community, and nor was it a tragedy of the commons: The communal aspect of the movement did not collapse because of abuse of communal resources or some other failure inherent in the communal plan. While kibbutzim, particularly those that were founded as pre-state communities with Zionism as part of their missions, faced many challenges – including and not limited to an identity-and-mission crisis after Israel's founding in 1948, the rise of the conservative (and free-market promoting) Likud party in 1977, occasional mismanagement, and a system that overall did not always meet its ideals – capitalist forces killed the socialist aspect of the kibbutz. Young people left the kibbutz to pursue jobs

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in cities – both inside and outside of Israel – as part of a wave of urbanization among shifting regional preferences. Societal values changed. People chose money over ideals, and *Me* over *We*. Professionals and entrepreneurs preferred to maximize their incomes rather than sharing them with the kibbutz. Community populations dropped and the system became financially unsustainable. In essence, the kibbutz did not suffer from internal unresolvable faults but from a series of deep external wounds.

Still, before capitalism conquered the kibbutz, kibbutzim served as an example of how communities could share resources without hurting their commons. For almost eight decades, kibbutzim represented a success of the commons. And today in some Israeli cities, there is a revival of urban communal kibbutzim. While Israel's cities, like those around the world, are growing ever larger, and city dwellers are surrounded by more and more people, that does not necessarily mean that people are finding community. Rather, today young Israelis are finding in urban kibbutzim the community that they otherwise find lacking in the city. The kibbutz itself has proven to be resilient as a concept, and it has helped its traditional communities become resilient to the pitfalls of market-based economies. The remaining traditional Israeli kibbutzim today along with the new urban kibbutzim serve as a bulwark against unbridled capitalism – and as a back-to-basics example of how community can trump greed.

Perhaps kibbutzim offer a lesson for how we successfully can address the wicked problems challenging sustainability: Communal problems can be addressed communally. The development and use of commons need not be tragic after all. Indeed, it may very well be communities and a reinvestment in valuing the commons that can save us from tragedy. And a good place to start could be ensuring that no one is left behind.

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